Characters

- CHORUS
- HELEN
- ELECTRA
- ORESTES
- MENELAUS
- TYNDAREUS
- PYLADES
- HERMIONE
- TROJAN SLAVE
- APOLLO

Act

*(*ELECTRA *enters; haunted looking and wan, watching over* ORESTES. *Voices enter, sustained chord.)*

CHORUS

After the murder Orestes collapsed.
He lies in his bed seized by a raging fever.
And driven on to madness by his mother's ghost
and Eumenides who pursue him.

Six days since they sent her body to the pyre and six days he has not tasted food but lies there submerged in blankets.

Sometimes he madly rises from bed crying out. The Argives have forbidden anyone to speak to them or shelter them.

Today the Argives meet to decide whether they shall live or die and if they will die by stoning or the sword.

One single hope is left.
Their uncle Menelaus has come home from Troy. His fleet

fills the harbor at Nauplia. He has brought Helen.

She so fears being killed by the fathers of those who died at Troy that Menelaus sent her ahead last night in darkness. She is in the palace weeping over her sister's, their mother's, death.

She has one consolation, her daughter Hermione, whom as a child she entrusted to their mother's care.

She has some comfort left but they do not so they sit watching the road in hope that Menelaus will come.

Unless he helps them, they must die.

(Enter HELEN, *not young but vain of her beauty. She carries a pitcher for libations and small locks of her hair.)*

HELEN

(To herself.)

Poor Clytemnestra. And to think I sailed for Troy without seeing her. Some god must have made me mad.

(Looking at ORESTES.)

When did he fall into this state?

ELECTRA

The day we spilt our mother's blood.

HELEN

(Turning abruptly from ORESTES.)

I want you to help me Electra. I want you to go to my sister's grave.

ELECTRA

What? You want me to go to my mother's grave? But why?

HELEN

To pour libations on her grave and leave these shorn strands

of my hair.
ELECTRA

But my mother was your sister. You go yourself.

HELEN

I am afraid.
I am afraid of the fathers of the soldiers who died at Troy.
Please go.
I do not want to walk the streets of Argos.
I am despised by the women here.

ELECTRA

No. I cannot bear the sight of my mother's grave.

HELEN

What can I do? I cannot send a servant.

ELECTRA

Then send Hermione.

HELEN

An unmarried girl cannot go alone to the grave.

ELECTRA

It is her duty. She owes it to my mother for caring for her.

(Helen pauses and then calls into the palace.)

HELEN

Hermione.

*(*HERMIONE, *a young girl, appears from the palace.)*

Do as I say. Take this libation and this hair and go to Clytemnestra's grave. Pour this honey mild and wine over

the grave and as you pour say these words;
"Your sister Helen, stopped by the fear of the Argives from coming to your grave sends you these tokens."
Then implore her to have mercy on my husband and me and on her poor children whom Apollo has destroyed.
Hurry and come back quickly.

(Exit Hermione with offerings. Helen goes into the palace.)

ELECTRA

(Bitterly.)

Did you see how she cut only the tips of her curls for her offering?

(ELECTRA'S *friends enter playing mournful music.)*

ELECTRA

Walk softly friends. Your music, keep it low.

CHORUS

He lies so still.

*(*ORESTES *suddenly stirs and wakes.)*

ORESTES

Sweet wizard sleep. How I needed you.

ELECTRA

How happy it made me to see you sleep at last. Let me raise your head.

ORESTES

Yes, please help me up.

ELECTRA

Let me brush this poor matted hair.

ORESTES

The fever makes me weary.

ELECTRA

My brother lie back down and do not move.

(He lies down while she brushes his hair.)

ELECTRA

Now listen. Listen Orestes. Our uncle Menelaus is here in Argos. His fleet lies at anchor at Nauplia.

ORESTES

What? Is it true?
Then our darkness has a dawn.
Our father did so much for him.
He will help us.

ELECTRA

There is more.
He has brought Helen home from Troy.

ORESTES

Then he has brought sorrow home.

(Suddenly ORESTES *starts up wild eyed and screaming.)*

ELECTRA

Orestes.

ORESTES

Take the snakes away.
Take the snakes with gorgon eyes away.

ELECTRA

Orestes there are no snakes.

ORESTES

They want to kill me.

ELECTRA

There are no snakes.

ORESTES

Let me go. Aseme. I know you, you're one of the Furies too. You're holding me down to hurl me into hell.

Oh my poor sister, how wrong it is that my madness should hurt you so.
I think now if I had asked my dead father should I kill our mother he would have begged me, gone down on his knees and begged me not to take her life.
What had we to gain by murdering her?
Her death could never bring him back to life and I, by killing her, have to suffer as I suffer now. It is hopeless.
But do not cry. And sometimes when you see me mad from desolation, comfort me and I in turn, when you despair, will comfort you.
Our love is all we have.
Now go inside.
And rest.
If you fall ill then I will die. You are my only help.
My only hope.

ELECTRA

I could never leave you Orestes. You are my hope too.
What am I without you?
A woman brotherless, fatherless, alone.

(She kisses him.)

Rest if you can.

(She exits with bowl upper stage center.)

CHORUS

Eumenides, women of darkness,
avengers of murder,
we implore you--
release this boy,
from his madness

Happiness is brief.
It will not stay.
God batters at its sails,
sorrow strikes,
and happiness goes down,
and glory sinks.

Hail to the king who led a thousand ships to Troy.

MENELAUS

Home at last. How happy I am to see this house once more--
But also sad for never have I seen a house more hedged about by suffering than this. Oh gods, is this some corpse I see?

ORESTES

It is I Uncle, your nephew.
I fall on my knees before you Menelaus.
and beg you to rescue us from death, you who have led a thousand ships to Troy.

MENELAUS

That stare in your eyes. When did this madness start?

ORESTES

The day we built my mother's tomb. It came on me as I stood at the pyre.

MENELAUS

That you should suffer is hardly strange. In Nauplia the sailors told me of the murder of Clytemnestra.

ORESTES

It was Apollo who commanded my mother's murder.

MENELAUS

A callous, unjust and immoral order.

ORESTES

We obey the gods, whoever they may be.

MENELAUS

How do you stand in the city?

ORESTES

So hated and despised am I that not one person in Argos will speak to me. The city is voting on our sentence today.

MENELAUS

Will they let you keep your father's sceptre?

ORESTES

They do not want me to live.

MENELAUS

What is the punishment -banishment or death?

ORESTES

Death by stoning.

MENELAUS

You must try to escape.

ORESTES

Argos is surrounded by soldiers.
And that is why I turn to you, my father's brother.
You are our only hope.
Menelaus, we are desperate.
You have arrived in Argos prosperous and in your moment of glory: I implore you to help us.

CHORUS

Menclaus: Tyndareus of Sparta is on his way here.

ORESTES

O gods.
What can I do?
Of all the men on this earth that I dread to meet it is my grandfather Tyndareus who loved me more than his own sons Castor and Polydeuces and who I loved as much as my own father.
Where can I hide from my grandfather's eyes?

(Enter TYNDAREUS *gaunt in his seventies dressed in mourning black. He too has attendants.)*

TYDAREAUS

(To women.)

Where can I find my daughter Helen's husband, Menelaus?

I was pouring libations on my daughter's grave when I heard the news of his arrival home at Nauplia after these long years.
MENELAUS

(Seeing him.)

Tyndareus!

TYDAREAUS

Menelaus my son!

(He stops abruptly as he sees ORESTES.)

TYDAREAUS

(Staring at Orestes.)

o fon yas dis kor iz mo
o fon yas dis kor iz mo
o fon yas dis kor iz mo
o fon yas dis kor iz mo

MENELAUS

Do not Tyndareus. Orestes is my brother's son.
And I loved my brother.

TYDAREAUS

This murderer.

(Pause.)

As a boy I held him in my arms.

MENELAUS

He is my brother's son in trouble.

TYDAREAUS

Foreigners, I see, have taught you their ways.

MENELAUS

It is a Greek custom, I think, to honor your kin.

TYDAREAUS

But not to put yourself above the laws.
Not once did Orestes weigh the justice of his cause or seek our courts.
When his father died he should have made Clytemnestra pay by legal action not murder.
Now if anything the evil he has done has surpassed her crime.
If a wife murders her husband and her son then kills her then his son must have his murder.
Then this chain of murder can never end since the last to kill is doomed to a permanent sentence of death by revenge.
Our ancestors banned murderers from sight forbidding them to speak or meet with anyone: and by this they purge their guilt by banishment not death and by so they stop the cycle of revenge.
There I take my stand, attacking with all my heart, the brutal spirit of murder that is corrupting our cities and destroying this country.
You heard me Orestes; brutal.

One thing I know.
These fits of madness are what you pay for murder.
Heaven itself has made you mad.

(He starts to leave.)

ORESTES

Grandfather, please listen.
You who held me in your arms when I was a boy.
Listen.
I had every right to kill Clytemnestra. She betrayed my father.
And I hated her.
She exiled my sister and me.
I had every right to kill her.

TYDAREAUS

I came from Sparta to lay flowers on your
mother's grave but now by god I have a stronger motive your death.
I will go to the Argives myself and hound them until they stone your sister and you. Yes, your sister.
It was Electra with her malice, telling you of her dreams of Agamemnon's ghost and his cries from the grave that incited you against your mother.

(Turning from ORESTES.)

I warn you Menelaus do not oppose the gods by rescuing Orestes and Electra.

(He exits. ORESTES *starts after him but is stopped by* MENELAUS.)

ORESTES

(Falls at MENELAUS' *feet.)*

Uncle, in honor of my dead father in his grave help us.

CHORUS

Save them Menelaus.

MENELAUS

Orestes I know we are joined by a common bond of blood and I am honor bound to come to your defense against your enemies.
I only wish I could. But I have arrived in Argos weakened.
My allies have dwindled away and I myself am exhausted from this terrible ordeal.
We are weak and therefore our weapons must be diplomacy.
This is my plan.
I will go to the Argives and try to calm their fury and hope it will burn itself out.
We have no other choice.
Be patient. The winds may shift.

*(*MENELAUS *exits.)*

ORESTES

You traitor! What have you ever done but fight a war to bring your wife back home? So now you turn your back and desert me.
This is the end.

This is the last of the house of Agamemnon.
My poor father deserted by his kin.
And now my last hope from death is lost ... Menelaus.

(Enter PYLADES.*)*

PLYADES

I seem to have come none too soon Orestes.
As I was coming through the town I saw the Argives meeting and heard them discussing a plan to execute Electra and you.

ORESTES

We are ruined.

PLYADES

As matters stand now our deaths are certain.

ORESTES

Our?

PLYADES

You, Electra, and I are one.

ORESTES

They vote on the sentence today.

PLYADES

Take Electra and try to escape.

ORESTES

Sentries are patrolling the streets.
We are surrounded like a city under siege.

PLYADES

I have suffered too.

ORESTES

Something else has happened?

PLYADES

My father has banished me from Phocis.

ORESTES

Heaven help us.

(Silence.)

What am I supposed to do? Die without saying a word in my own defense?

PLYADES

There is nothing to gain from staying here but if you go to the meeting then something might be gained. But you may be killed.

ORESTES

But I must go.

(Pause.)

My madness. What if I have an attack?
Madmen are hard to handle.

PLYADES

I will manage.

ORESTES

But if my madness strikes you too?

PLYADES

I am not afraid.

ORESTES

Then take me first to my father's grave.
I want to pray and implore his help.

PLYADES

Good.

ORESTES

But Pylades, don't let me see my mother's grave.

PLYADES

I will not.
We must go now.
Here lean on me.
Let the people jeer.
I'll lead you through the city unashamed.
What is friendship worth unless I prove it in this time of trouble.

(They exit.)

CHORUS

Glory decays, and
greatness goes
from the happy house of Atreus.
Beneath the proud facade
the long stain spread

as the curse of blood began--
strife for a golden ram,
slaughter of little princes,
a table laid with horror,
a feast of murdered sons.
And still corruption swelled,
murder displacing murder,
to reach at last
the living heirs of Atreus.

What terror can compare with us?

Hands of a son,
Stained with his mother's blood.

(ELECTRA *appears from the palace and is frightened to find* ORESTES *gone.)*

ELECTRA

(To women.)

Where is Orestes? Has his madness come again?

CHORUS

No Electra. He went to the Argive meeting to speak in his own defense.

ELECTRA

But why? Who persuaded him?

CHORUS

Pylades.

(Enter messenger.)

MESSENGER

Princess Electra.
I bring you sad news.

ELECTRA

(Pause.)

Our sentence is death.

MESSENGER

Yes. The Argives voted that you and your brother must die today.

ELECTRA

And how are we to die my brother and I?

MESSENGER

Poor Orestes was just able to persuade them not to stone you both to death by promising that you and he would kill yourselves this day.
Pylades is bringing him home.
So bring out the sword for you must leave this light.
Apollo has destroyed you both.

ELECTRA

(Trembling.)

Down and down my house.
Pelops line is ended.
Down and down
Greatness has gone from the house of Atreus
Ending with this curse on my brother and me.
i thei namas vo i thi sun

(Enter ORESTES *supported by* PYLADES. ELECTRA *bursts into tears at the sight of him.)*

ELECTRA

Orestimu Orestimu

*(*ORESTES *kissing her.)*

ORESTES

No more Electra.
What shame on earth can touch me anymore?
O my sister, this last sweet embrace is all we shall ever know of love and marriage.
Our time has come.
We must choose the sword or the rope.

ELECTRA

Kill me yourself Orestes.

ORESTES

I cannot my sister.

ELECTRA

If only one sword could kill us both. If we could only share one coffin together.

ORESTES

No ... we must die as we were born ... well ... as the children of Agamemnon.
I shall show Argos of what blood I come by
falling on my sword and you must follow and die bravely.
Pylades lay us out and make us both one grave beside my father's tomb.

PLYADES

My friend how could you think I would want to live if you were dead?

ORESTES

Pylades.
You have your country, your father's house and wealth.
Marry and have heirs. The bonds which bound us once are broken now. Goodbye my only friend.

PLYADES

I murdered with you. I helped plan the crime for which you suffer and now I should die with you and Electra.
It is my duty.

(Pause.)

Wait! But since we have to die, is there not some way to make Menelaus suffer. He did not one thing to help his brother's children.

ORESTES

How could he be avenged?

PLYADES

Listen: we will avenge him by murdering Helen.

ORESTES

There is no way we could do this.

PLYADES

Yes there is. We'll go inside the palace pretending that we are about to kill ourselves.

ORESTES

And then?

PLYADES

We will weep and tell her how much we suffer.

Then she will pretend to weep.

We'll carry the swords hidden in our robes and while she pretends this grief we'll lock her slaves in different rooms.

ORESTES

Then death to Helen.

PLYADES

Not only do we avenge her for ourselves, but we avenge her in the name of all Hellas, whose fathers and sons she murdered.
There will be celebrations in Argos.
Men will bless our heads and sing songs of glory to us for doing away with her.
Should we fail we'll burn this house around us as we die.
Orestes you shall not be cheated of honor.

*(*ELECTRA, *who has been sitting, joins in.)*

ELECTRA

Listen Orestes: you too Pylades. Do you remember Helen's daughter, Hermione?

ORESTES

The little girl our mother took care of?

ELECTRA

Yes. Well she has now gone to Clytemnestra's grave to pour libations there.

ORESTES

What has this to do with our escape?

ELECTRA

When she comes back we will seize her.

ORESTES

How will that help us?

ELECTRA

We must have a plan. Once Helen is dead Menelaus may attempt to capture one of us. And if he tries, we will set our sword at Hermione's throat and warn him, we will kill her.
If then seeing Helen lying in a pool of blood, he decides he wants his daughter's life, and agrees to spare us, we will let Hermione go. But if he tries to kill one of us in a mad rage then we will slit her throat.
He is a coward as we have seen. I believe he will not fight.
And there you have my plan for making our escape.

ORESTES

I like this plan.
How soon do you think Hermione will return?

ELECTRA

Any moment now.

ORESTES

Then Electra you stay here and wait for her return. Make certain that no one and no friend of her father's enters the palace. But if someone does beat your fist on the door and raise the cry. But let us know. Pylades and I will go inside now to Helen. Have your sword ready.

(He raises his arms in prayer and invokes the ghost of Agamemnon.)

ORESTES

O my father, ghost who walks the black house of Atreus, your son Orestes calls upon your help in his hour of need.

It is for you father I suffer.
For you I was condemned to death unfairly.
And your own brother has betrayed me though what I did was right. Come father, help me to capture Helen.
Help me kill her.
O Father help us now.
ELECTRA

O father if you can hear our prayers beneath the earth know that we die for you.

PLYADES

O Agamemnon kinsman of my father.
Hear my prayers.
Save your children.

ORESTES

I murdered my mother.

PLYADES

I held the sword that killed.

ELECTRA

I was their spirit.
I made them brave.

ORESTES

I offer my tears to you.

ELECTRA

And I my grief.

PLYADES

Enough. If prayers can penetrate this earth he hears.

We must go about this business now.
Three friends together. One common cause. Together we shall live or die.
ELECTRA

Women of Argos, a word with you please.

CHORUS

What is it Princess Electra?

ELECTRA

I want half of you to watch the road and the rest will stand guard here.

(Women divide.)

CHORUS

I'll watch the road to the east.

And I'll watch here on the westward side.

All's well here. Not an Argive in sight.

Nor here either. Not a soldier in sight.

ELECTRA

Then wait.

(She calls inside the palace to ORESTES *and* PYLADES.)

Why are you so quiet?
They don't answer. Not a sound. O Zeus. Has her beauty blinded them too?

(Suddenly from within the palace.)

HELEN

Help me Argos.
They're murdering me.
They're murdering me.

ELECTRA

O Zeus send us strength.
Help us now.

HELEN

Help me I'm dying ... vo i thia pe the no

ELECTRA

Run the traitoress through.
Kill the whore who killed so many brave men.

CHORUS

Electra we hear the sound of footsteps. Someone is coming.

ELECTRA

It must be Hermione. Yes it is Hermione herself.
Quiet, not a sound. Appear natural as though nothing has happened here.

(Enter HERMIONE.)

Hermione have you returned from Clytemnestra's grave and did you circle it with flowers and pour libations?

HERMIONE

Yes I paid her the dues of the dead.

(Pause.)

But what has happened here? I thought I heard a scream in the distance.

ELECTRA

A scream?

HERMIONE

What has happened?

ELECTRA

Orestes and I have been sentenced to death.

HERMIONE

Zeus, Zeus.

ELECTRA

And he went and fell at Helen's knees.

HERMIONE

I don't understand.

ELECTRA

Orestes went to implore Helen to save our lives.

HERMIONE

Then that was the cry I heard?

ELECTRA

Yes and if you love us go now, fall at your mother's feet and beg her.
Implore her to intercede with Menelaus on our behalf.
You are our very last hope.

HERMIONE

Oh yes. I will go now. If it lies in my power you are saved.

*(*HERMIONE *enters the palace.)*

Ach Mi ter a mu
ORESTES

(From inside the palace.)

Silence Hermione. You are here to save us.

ELECTRA

Seize her and stop her screaming. Let Menelaus learn what it is to fight with men, not cowards from Troy.
Make him suffer for his indifference to us.

*(*ELECTRA *enters the palace closing the doors behind her. From inside are cries and muffled screams.)*

CHORUS

Quick raise a shout, a cry to drown the sound of murder in the palace before the Argives hear.

Be still. Be still.
It is a Trojan slave. He will tell us what has happened. Be still.

*(*A TROJAN SLAVE *incoherent from terror bursts from the palace.)*

TROJAN SLAVE

Trojan scared and run,
clamber over the roof.
O
Ilium,
Ilium Troy
hear the dirge I cry ai ai.
Out of hiding
Out of purple cloaks
they drew their swords and eyes of them. O going round to see if danger anywhere and then they came.

They were yes shouting and screaming

die die die for traitor husband coward who
betrayed his brother's son
who left him to die in Argos.
Lady Helen screamed white arms flailing
flailing beating bosom beating breast
hair she tore in sandals leaped to run
but after after came Orestes.
Caught her O winding fingers in her hair
and neck forced back
down down
against her shoulder and lifted
the sword to strike.
CHORUS

Where were the servants?

TROJAN SLAVE

We batter doors with iron bars break down panels.
Then run some with stones.
Pylades came on brave Hectorlike or Ajax.
Steel on steel together meet but soon we see
Trojan men, ai ai one run dead
wounding this and begging that
near the dirge I cry ai ai
falling some dying others
staggering is one with wounds.
And then Hermione came in as mother Helen sank to die.
O Earth O Night.
What then happen I do not know.

CHORUS

Now retribution follows sin.
Through the fated house more winds blow.

And through the rooms round the stone cornice
Ring out new death cries.
Grief has come down once more
On the house of Atreus.

(Enter MENELAUS *with armed men.)*

MENELAUS

I have heard this tale of brutal and mad crimes committed by Electra and Orestes.
Men break down the door so that I can rescue my dear daughter from these murderers and bring out Helen's body.
In revenge for her I shall put them to death.

(Suddenly from the roof comes billowing smoke.)

CHORUS

Look on the roof of the palace.

(Slowly smoke rises. They watch.)

They are burning the ancestral house.

MENELAUS

Madness has consumed them.

(The door opens; behind it ORESTES *is holding a knife to* HERMIONE'S *throat.)*

MENELAUS

mi och i tin(z) ko ri mo
Why are you holding my daughter?
Wasn't it enough that you murdered her mother?

ORESTES

And now I will kill your daughter.

MENELAUS

But why?

ORESTES

You betrayed us Menelaus.

MENELAUS

Wasn't Clytemnestra's death enough?

ORESTES

Helen and Clytemnestra were whores.

MENELAUS

But Hermione?

ORESTES

Hermione's death will be to avenge my father.
And now we'll burn this doomed palace.

MENELAUS

Burn the house of Atreus?

ORESTES

To keep it from you Menelaus. But first the sword at Hermione's throat.

(Among the armed men and women there is great commotion and cries in Greek: ti ka non ti ji ne te.)

MENELAUS

Could you kill my child?

What is it that you want?

(Cries in Greek: prepi na skoto thun.)

ORESTES

Persuade the people.

MENELAUS

Persuade them of what?

ORESTES

To let us live traitor.

MENELAUS

Or you kill my child?

ORESTES

Yes.

MENELAUS

Then I am trapped.

ORESTES

Yes trapped by your own mercilessness.
Electra burn the parapet
Pylades set the roof to blazes.

MENELAUS

Vo i thi a
Strati ote tu argo
Vo i thia

(Chaos ensues. Suddenly APOLLO *appears in the palace doorway.)*

APOLLO

Cease Menelaus. It is I Pheobus Apollo.
Helen is here with me. Orestes did not kill her.
Helen, being born of Zeus, could not die
and now will sit enthroned forever, a star for sailors.

It is Orestes' destiny to leave Argos and journey to the city of Athena and give justice for his mother's murder. The gods on the hill of Ares shall be his judges and acquit him in a sacred verdict.
Then Orestes will marry Hermione.
Electra shall marry Pylades as promised.
Happiness awaits him.
Menelaus will be king in Sparta and I shall give Argos to Orestes ... for it was I who commanded his mother's murder. I compelled him to kill.

ORESTES

Hail Apollo for your oracles. And yet sometimes when I heard you speak to me it seemed the whispers of a monster. But all is well now and I obey. See I release Hermione and we shall marry if her father gives his blessing.

MENELAUS

I envy your happiness with the gods. Orestes I betroth Hermione to you as Apollo commands.

APOLLO

(Dismissing them.)

Go and honor peace now. Helen I now lead to the halls of Zeus among the blazing stars, there with Hera she shall sit a goddess forever and reign the seas, a light to sailors.

(The palace door closes.)

CURTAIN